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The Ulu Knife

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Description :

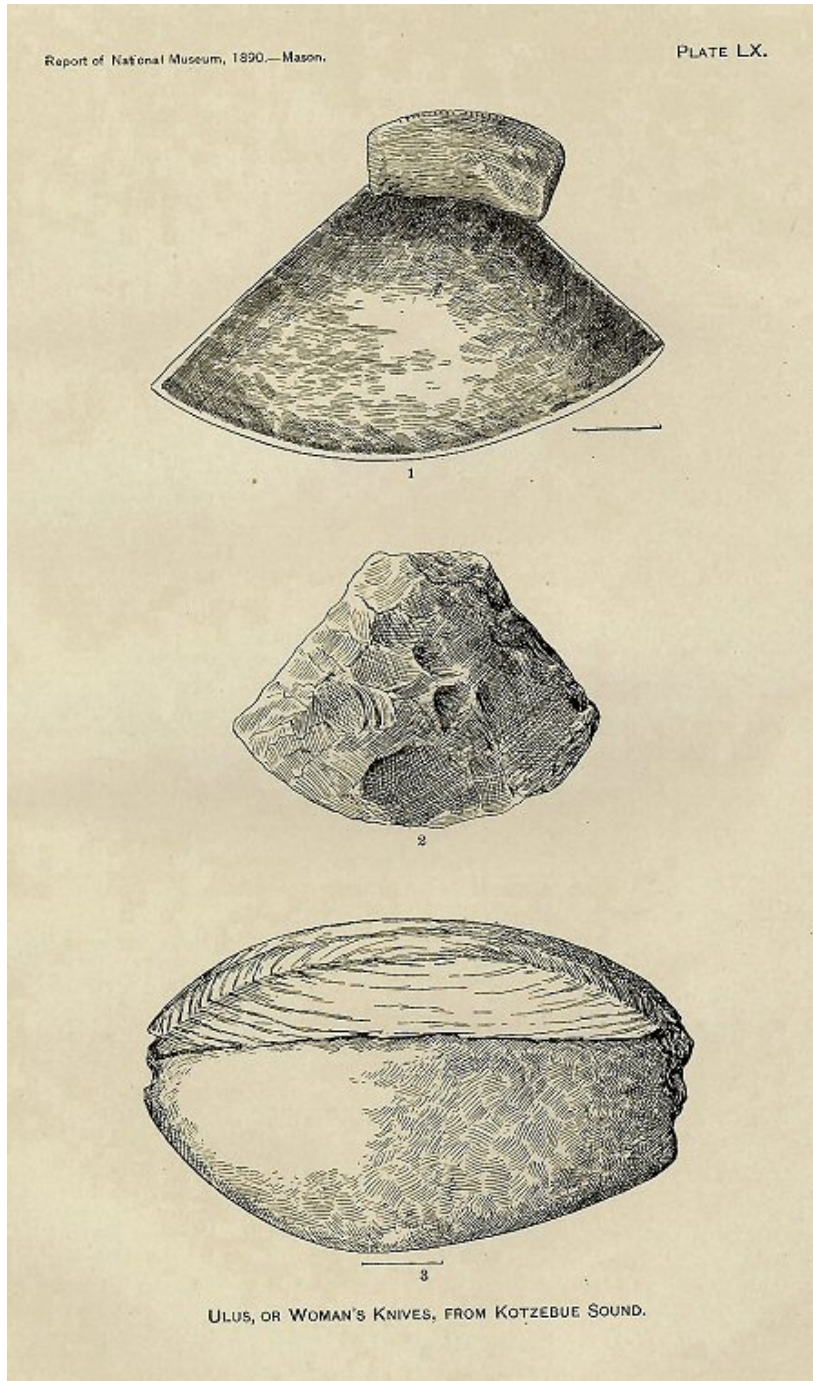
This article covers three ulus (and one knife) made by Maynard Linder of Homer Alaska, with some observations by the author on the utility of an ulu.

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The Ulu Knife

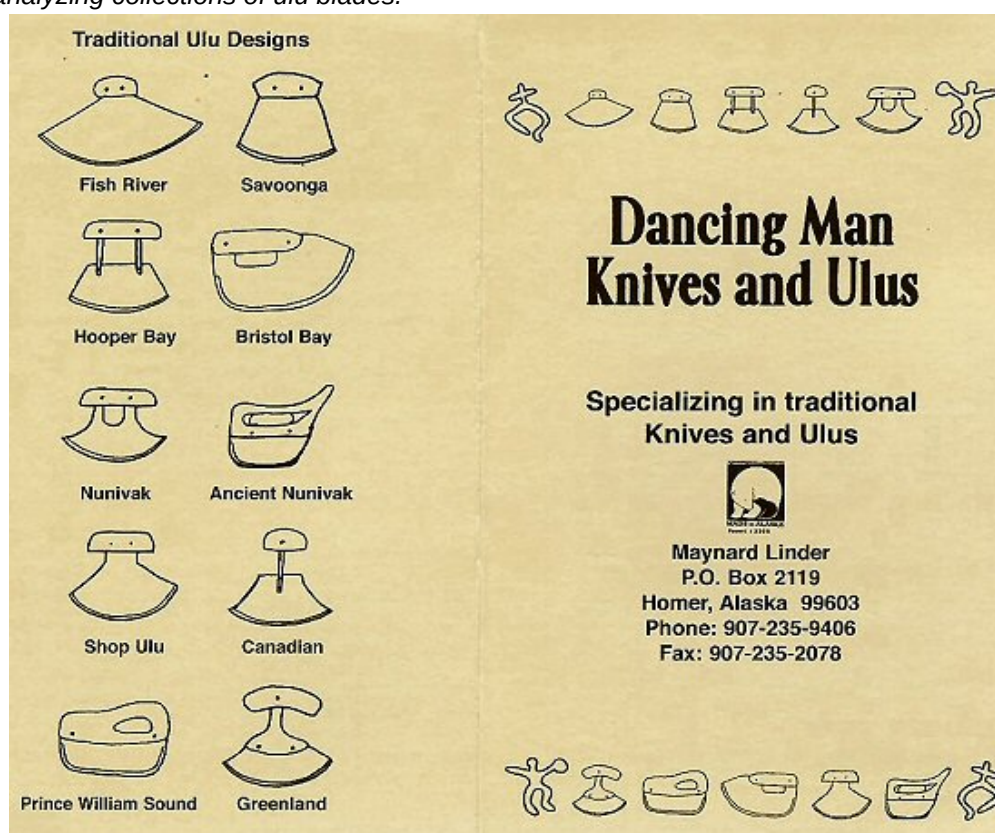
A knife form unique to the Arctic regions is the ulu. There are several configurations of the ulu depending upon its origin, but whether it originated in Greenland or points across Canada and Alaska, the basic form is a thin curved blade attached to a handle. The basic forms were cataloged in 1890 by the Smithsonian Institution in their annual report (cited below). Very early ulus were crafted from slate, shale, quartzite and other stone with bone, ivory or wood handles. Once steel was available to the Arctic peoples they incorporated it, apparently following the local patterns. Below is one plate from this report, 3 ulus (one steel, 2 stone) from the Kotzebue Sound region of Alaska.



Kotzebue Sound pattern ulus

The ulu is generally considered a Women's knife and was designed for processing of food; ranging from fish, game and seals to whales; cleaning and filleting fish; skinning and fleshing hides; processing meat; and the making of clothing from skins.

In the February 2003 edition of *Current Anthropology*, a comparative study of slate vs steel ulus was published. This limited ethnoarchaeological study, by Frank et al provided both ground slate and steel ulus to a family of Cup'ik Eskimos in Chevak Alaska who primarily harvest salmon during the summer for subsistence. They were primarily looking at fish processing efficiency of the two ulu materials. They conclude that steel ulus were as much as 3 times more efficient as the provided slate versions; primarily due to blade sharpness. They also stated that the women using the slate versions were not familiar with their optimal use techniques that their ancestors probably employed. They looked at time to process various fish ranging in size from 1 lb whitefish to 8.5 lb salmon. The women using their own ulus (better shaped than the study ulus) they were able to process large salmon in 3 to 4 minutes verses 8 to 36 minutes for the slate versions. These women showed strong preference to their own ulu pattern. The provided pattern in both steel and slate was much like the Savoonga pattern in Maynard Linder's brochure (shown below), and from what I can tell based on the papers discussion the preferred pattern was probably more like Linder's Fish River or possibly his Nunivak, (their ulus had flared corners with pointed ends). The authors state: *Although the general semilunar shape is ideal for a wide variety of tasks, differences in blade style and size may indicate the intentional design of tools for different cutting tasks. There are probably numerous functionally related ulu shapes which are not systematically recorded in the literature. Archaeologists should pay close attention to the details of shape and wear analysis when analyzing collections of ulu blades.*



Maynard Linder Ulu Patterns

How the various configurations came about would be an interesting study in itself, and as the *Current Anthropology* study noted above likely highly dependent upon the primary foods processed by the local peoples. However, this article is primarily about using these great tools outside of an Arctic environment and will feature one Alaska makers work.

Maynard Linder of Homer Alaska made three of my ulus. I have found his work to be efficient and pleasing to use as-well-as having an indescribable soul that resonates from his use of natural materials and old steel. I encountered his work on a visit to SE Alaska, (see my [John Muir article](#) for more about this trip) and like many other tourists decided to buy an ulu on my trip. I did not want the typical gift store ulus that are stamped out by the ton, handled and marked as Alaska souvenirs, meant primarily as a display pieces. I wanted a working tool from a native artist. At first, all I could find were mountains of the tourist stuff for sale at prices as low as \$0.99! These were ulus by definition I suppose, but lacked any degree of "authenticity" and certainly did not possess any soul. Finally in a small gallery/shop in Haines, Alaska I found a large selection of Maynard Linder's work. The prices were quite reasonable

given that these were made by a craftsman not a machine. I instantly recognized these as tools rather than souvenirs or gallery items.

Maynard's ulus are made with high carbon carpenter's hand saw steel, either vintage or new, and handled with natural materials including wood, moose and caribou antler, ivory, oosik, musk ox horn, copper, and Steller's SeaCow bone. The ulu patterns vary in size but follow traditional patterns. The handle materials are grooved and the blade bedded in epoxy and riveted with brass pins. I have three styles, a large Bristol Bay, 8 inch Fish River, and a large sewing ulu. Both of the larger ulus are handled in caribou antler, and the sewing ulu in SeaCow bone. All my blades are vintage steel, very thin, somewhat flexible and sharpened on both sides with a convex edge. Some of his patterns are sharpened on only one side, but I do not have any of those examples. Maynard supplies these with a split plastic tubing edge protector and an antler display stand. Edges are very sharp as supplied and very easily maintained on a loaded leather strop.



All three Maynard Linder Ulus

My ulu see most use in my kitchen. While I do not, of course, do any fleshing or skinning in my kitchen, the 8" Fish River is my most used ulu. It has essentially nearly replaced my cook's knives in the kitchen. I use it for nearly everything from vegetable preparation and baking to meat slicing. The long thin curved blade just glides through cheese and sausage, slices crusty breads, minces herbs, chops vegetables and nearly every other thing. It is a super tool for baking sourdough breads for slicing and transferring rolls to scraping and transferring the sticky dough for my pastry board to baking sheet.



Fish River Pattern slicing

I use it with two styles of action; a rocking forward slice action and a straight push cut (sometimes with a slight roll added) depending on the food. I also hold it in two ways, the "standard" grip of the handle in my palm as shown above and also with the sides of the handle "pinched" between my thumb and second finger for quick mincing action as shown below. I find this tool to be just about my most versatile kitchen knife now.



Fish River Pattern mincing

The Bristol Bay pattern is not my first choice for pattern styles for most use in my kitchen, but as a crusty bread slicer it is quite nice....I use it in a push cut slice with it long edge held towards my body (probably backwards in reality). I

find the long open handle great for this hold but also find it more limiting as an all-around ulu when compared to the Fish River pattern.



Bristol Bay Pattern

My third ulu is a large sewing ulu which is about my favorite of the three due to the SeaCow bone handle and its overall feel. The handy size makes a perfect leather working tool much like a traditional leatherworkers round or head knife. Cutting leather with this ulu is much easier using a rocking slice on a cutting mat than using a utility knife in a pull (and leather stretch) motion. As a thread and edge trimmer while sewing it is also perfectly suited. I liked this tool so much that I asked Danny Kuehn to make me a sheath for it as part of my repair kit. He added the Inuit Innunguaq carving on the back of the sheath and moosehide slip pocket on the front. The handcarved bone beads tension the laces which wrap around the ulu holding it and the slip pocket secure without the use of modern hardware. Overall a unique and useful sheath design with character, grace and soul that match the ulu itself.



Sewing Ulu sheath with otter bag photo by Daniel Kuehn

I quote from *The Inuksuk Book* by Mary Wallace

Inunnguaq — Like a person

An inuksuk is a stone structure that can communicate knowledge essential for survival to an Arctic traveller. Inuksuit (plural) are found throughout the Arctic areas of Alaska, Arctic Canada and Greenland. Inuksuit have been used by the Inuit to act in place of human messengers. For those who understand their forms, inuksuit in the Arctic are very important helpers: they can show direction, tell about a good hunting or fishing area, show where food is stored, indicate a good resting place or act as a message centre. Every inuksuk is unique because it is built from the stones at hand. Inuksuit can be small or large; a single rock put in place; several rocks balanced on top of each other; boulders placed in a pile; or flat stones stacked. One of these stone structures is known as an inuksuk, two are called inuksuuk and three or more are referred to as inuksuit. An inuksuk is a strong connection to the land: it is built on the land, it is made of the land and it tells about the land. Inuit are taught to be respectful of inuksuit. There is a traditional law, which persists today, that forbids damaging or destroying inuksuit in any way. New inuksuit can be built to mark the presence of modern-day Inuit, but the old ones should never be touched. Traditionally, it is said that if one destroys an inuksuk, his or her life will be cut shorter. Over time, the style of building inuksuit has changed. In the past, most inuksuit were built by stacking rock in a particular way, but usually not in the shape of a human. However, many modern inuksuit are built to look like human figures made of stone (with a head, body, arms and legs). In Inuktitut, these are called inunnguaq. Some Inuit believe that this type of stone figure was first built about one hundred years ago, after the arrival of the qattunaat (non-Inuit) whalers. Others say that this human look-alike originated long before this century. All things change with time; Inuit ways are not exempt. Today, as traditional ways are changing into contemporary ways Inuit, and even non-Inuit, sometimes build inuksuit simply to mark their presence-both in the Arctic and in their travels outside of their homeland.



Innunguaq (in the likeness of a human) Photo provided by Daniel Kuehn



Sewing ulu, sheath back with otter bag Photo by Daniel Kuehn

His incorporation of such a strong but simple carving on the sheath is characteristic of his leather work and his study and understanding of native peoples traditions. Danny's comments on Maynard's work *"one of the finest made traditional ulu's I have seen. Stellar Sea Cow handle, carbon steel blade with an extremely sharp convex edge, make this a highly efficient tool for any kit. A traditional ulu like this demands a traditional sheath in my opinion. Snaps, buckles, or other hardware just wouldn't do."*

Danny also made a small bag from otter fur to hold my traditional repair kit, extra repair leather, sewing needles, awl, beeswax, stitching cord, caribou sinew, antler buttons and pieces, and my sealskin thimble. This package; ulu, sheath, and otter bag is one of the best representations I have of traditional art and among my most prized possessions. With this compact kit I can handle most emergency and routine repairs of my outdoor gear.



Sewing ulu, otter bag and repair kit

Just a year ago I had heard of ulus and seen a few but never had the opportunity to understand their unique applications. Using traditional tools for both traditional and modern uses is always an area of interest for me but I never imagined that I would find my ulus taking over for knives that I have used all my life.

I highly recommend Maynard Linder's work. His attention to detail and his ability to make a highly useful tool designed to be used and appreciated are his strong points as a craftsman, but the addition of soul and artistry to his ulus simply must be seen to be appreciated. I have a special recommendation for his large Fish River pattern ulus as a kitchen tool and his large sewing ulu for your repair kit, but I have this feeling that over the years a few more of his pattern ulus will be finding a place in my kit. Visiting SE Alaska was a visual and experiential treat, but finding Maynard's work was an added bonus.

Maynard Linder's Knife Line...an addenda

Not long after publishing this article I decided I needed to try out one of Maynard's knives. I elected to buy an Eskimo knife, a short, (4") thin-bladed knife with SeaCow bone handle. Maynard handled this knife using a three-quarter tang method. He slots a solid piece of SeaCow and then glues and pins the knife blade in place. He uses either band saw steel or handsaw steel. This example was made using old band saw steel. This is thin steel and a simple convex edge is ground on it. He did not supply a sheath....so I turned to Daniel Kuehn once again.



Linder Eskimo Knife with Dannyboy Sheath Photo by Daniel Kuehn

This Dannyboy Leather Sheath with a Niugvaliruluit Inuksuk image was done from a crude sketch I sent to Danny. This directional pointer type of Inuksuk just seemed to fit my idea of this knife. I took the Niugvaliruluit Inuksuk idea from Mary Wallace's Inuskuk Book, it is an Inuskuk "That has Legs".



Linder Eskimo Knife with Dannyboy Sheath Photo by Daniel Kuehn

This image also shows a Maynard Linder large sewing ulu with caribou antler.

Once again Danny has produced a sheath that not only captures the soul of the knife but provides a safe, secure and beautiful way to carry and use this knife.

Fish River Ulu Sheath

The Ulu Knife

Earlier this year I was commanded by my wife to sheath the ulu rather than have its sharp edge just laying in the kitchen drawer. I was going to ask Danny to make me a sheath but could not even think of sending it off. So I decided to make my first ever sheath. I bought some 8-9oz scrap veg tanned leather and decided to do an edge lace with 1/8" Kangaroo.



Fish River Ulu Sheath Pancake sheath, edge laced with Kangaroo

I used the easiest possible sheath design. I made it large enough (almost) so that I did not need an edge welt as the handle keeps the ulu edge away from the lace. One side is closed about 1.5 inches and the other open to the corner. My lace sticks out a bit and it is super easy to slice the lace with the ulu, but in the several months I have been using this it is still holding up. I should have made this about a quarter inch larger all around.

I used a simple Spanish edge lace pattern done in one string of Kangaroo into drilled holes (which do waver about a bit).



Fish River Ulu Sheath Pivot the ulu into the sheath, this side open to the corner, the other laced nearly closed.

Anyway it is a solid functional sheath that taught me plenty of leatherworking lessons (one for instance...call an expert).

Small Sewing Ulu Sheath

The Ulu Knife

Not taking my own advice about calling a sheathmaker...I decided to make a small credit card sized sheath for one of Linder's small sewing ulus. This one with an artifact ivory handle.

I used scrap veg tanned leather for this.



Linder Small Sewing Ulu Ivory artifact handle, Schwert sheath layout

And saddle stitched this with artificial sinew. A twist of sinew and a couple of needles can also be slipped into the sheath.



Finished Small Sewing Ulu

Resources

Write to Maynard Linder and request his brochure of traditional ulus and knives at:

Dancing Man Knives and Ulus

Maynard Linder

PO Box 2119

Homer, Alaska 99603

USA

Prices are quite reasonable and range from \$34 to \$138 for his ulus, and from \$34 to \$168 for his range of traditional knives (fall 2005 price list). Special handle materials are additional.

From Maynard's brochure and a letter from him: He moved to Alaska in 1969 and worked as a carpenter for 20 years. In 1990 he married into a Seward Peninsula Eskimo family and was asked to make an ulu after the fashion of Fish River pattern from 1870. Elder Eskimo women liked this ulu so well that three years later he was making all the traditional patterns and by 1994 a full-time maker of both ulus and knives. He spends the summer and early fall of each year about 130 miles north of Nome collecting naturally shed antler for his work.

Dannyboy Leather

PO Box 3277

LaPine, OR 97739

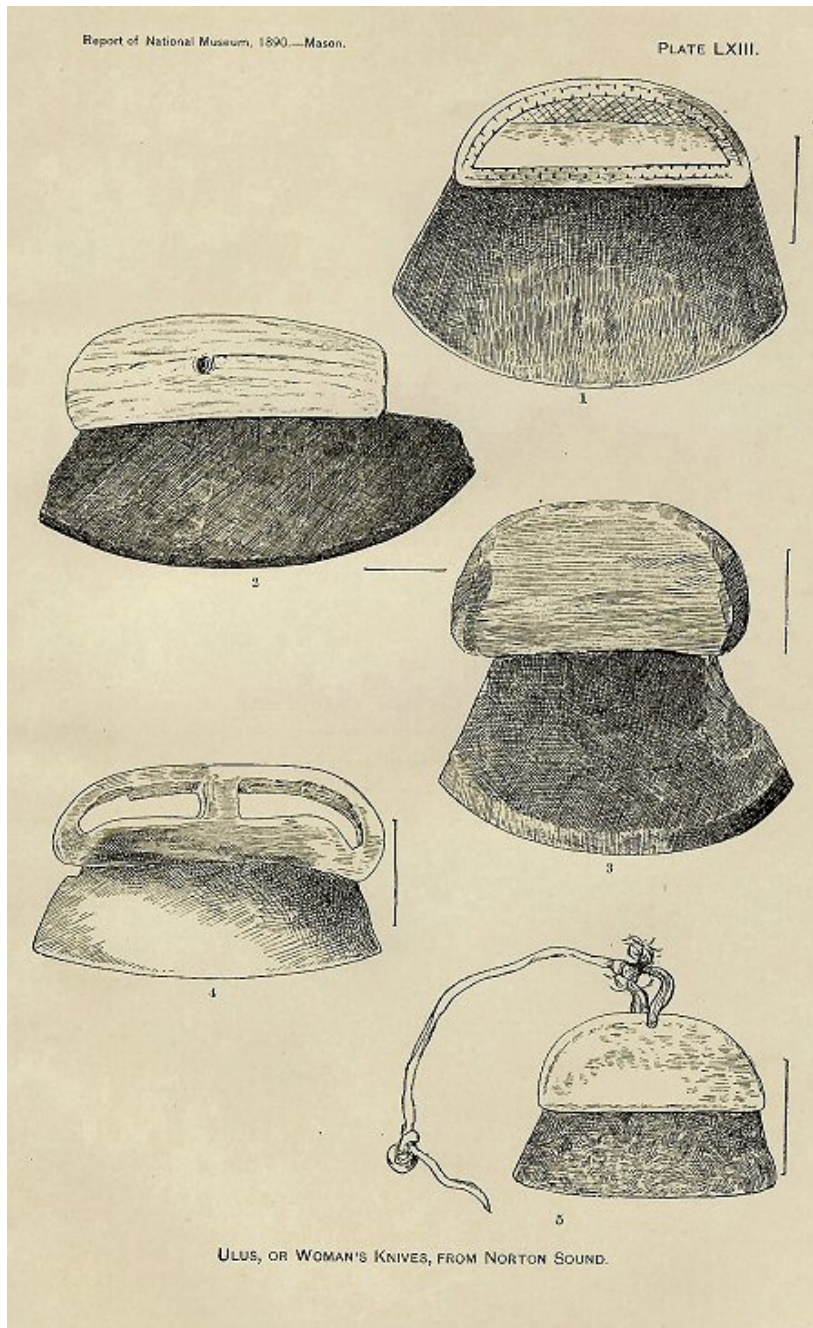
Danny Kuehn is a super leatherworker. His work has all the detail and quality I would expect from a leathercraftsman but, like Maynard he adds a bit of soul to the work. Not only are his sheaths superbly suitable and functional, but they also have artistry appropriate to the knife. He studies and appreciates traditional methods, so when presented with a traditional tool he sheaths it with a depth of appreciation beyond the mere functional aspects. I asked him to carve an appropriate image into the sheath for the sewing ulu that would represent the traditions of the Arctic peoples, he choose the Inuksuk, and I do not think there could have been a better choice.

Smithsonian reference

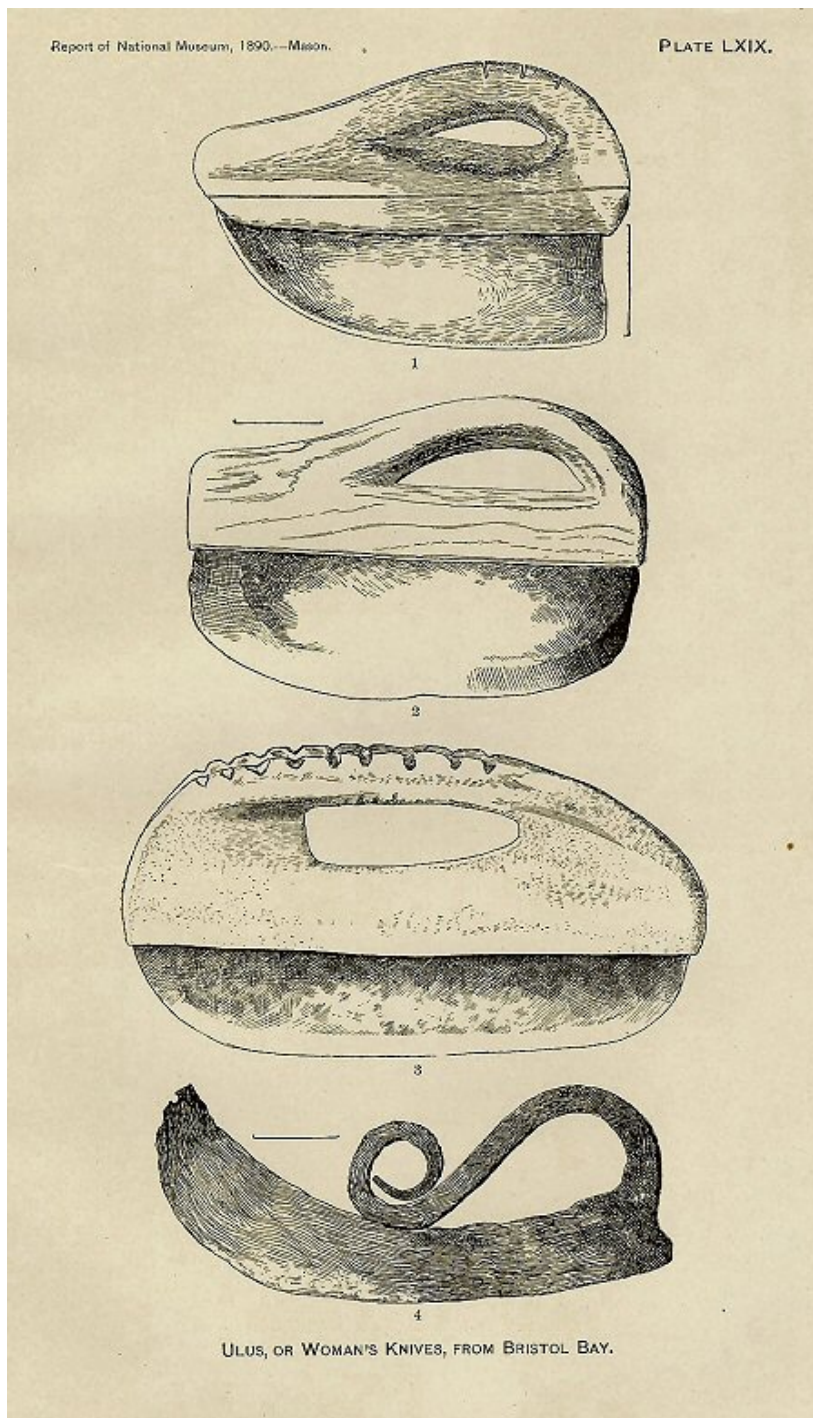
Otis T. Mason, *The Ulu, or Woman's Knife of the Eskimo*. From the Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ending June 30, 1890. Pages 411-416 plus 21 full page plates with descriptions.

I picked up these pages from a bookseller who had dissected the original bound volume into the various topics of the Smithsonian collection. While this represented the collection in 1890 and consisted of 21 plates of approximately 70 collected ulu patterns it did not provide much detail of the various ulu pattern purposes as I had hoped, it did generally classify the various shapes that Maynard produces and provide details of ulu construction prior to the introduction of iron and steel.

Additional plates from this publication



Norton Sound pattern ulus



Bristol Bay pattern ulus

Current Anthropology reference

Lisa Frank, Brian Hoffman and Robert Shaw, Ulu Knife Use in Western Alaska: A Comparative Ethnoarchaeological Study, *Current Anthropology*, 44:1, February 2003, 116-122.

Additional Reading

Two excellent and similar books are available whose topics are Inuksuit and the Inuit culture. The first by Mary Wallace is an excellent starter book, and the second by Norman Hallendy a more in depth study of Inuksuk in the Inuit culture for anyone intrigued by these ancient monuments.

The Inuksuk Book by Mary Wallace. A 64 page book, published by Maple Tree Press in 1999, and distributed in North America by Firefly Books. Available in paper or hardcover this semi-childrens book is filled with Inuit inuksuit photos and watercolors, superb historical photographs, short stories and explanations. The guide to Inuktitut words and pronunciation is excellent, (Inunnguaq is pronounced Ee-non-WAWK). The short "Build your own" Inunnguaq would be a fun project for a family. Norman Hallendy, the author of the next recommend book, provides the introduction. An excellent text for children and adults that is available from Amazon in paper for less than \$12.

The [website](#) description covers this one well:

An introduction to the many forms of the inuksuk structure The image of a traditional Inuit stone structure, or inuksuk, silhouetted against an arctic sky, has become a familiar symbol. Yet, for many, their purpose remains a mystery. In a stunning new book, artist and children's author Mary Wallace, in consultation with Inuit elders and other noted experts, gives a fascinating introduction in words, pictures, and paintings to the many forms of the inuksuk structure and its unique place in Inuit life and culture. Mary Wallace is an award-winning writer, teacher, artist and author of Make Your Own Inuksuk.

ISBN: 1-895688-91-4 paper \$12.95

ISBN: 1-895688-90-6 hardcover \$19.95

Inuksuit, Silent Messengers of The Arctic, by Norman Hallendy. This 127 page hardcover was published by the University of Washington Press in Seattle, Washington in August 2000. It contains over 50 color photographs of Inuksuk. From the back cover: *This is the first comprehensive book about the Arctic's mysterious stone figures called Inuksuit, as told by Inuit elders to author Norman Hallendy, together with his rare and haunting photographs.*

This is a very interesting and beautifully done book. Hallendy spent many years in the company of Inuit friends who helped him understand these silent messengers. His photographs and text made me realize that I did NOT understand these monuments. Their significance to the Inuit culture and their multiple meanings and purposes are far beyond the cairns of my experience. A highly recommended text and one that even more made me appreciate the simple significance of the carving by Daniel Kuehn on the ulu sheath.

Out of print but can be found on [bookfinder.com](#).

ISBN: 0295979836

Request

Should anyone reading this article have any reference materials on the origin of the various ulu patterns I would greatly appreciate a citation (attach a reply to this article). I suppose the various pattern forms, geographically distributed across the Arctic are based on both the original ulu raw materials (stone) and presumably the primary diet of the peoples who worked the pattern. Any source materials exploring these connections would be greatly appreciated.

Additional Information

I was able to find an excellent lecture on Inuit Tools including the ulu, by Assoc. Professor Dr. Jill Oakes, of the

department of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. This was on a website titled *Aboriginal [Business Case Studies](#)* in Canada.

Other case studies and lectures of interest are also available from the [main page](#).

The Tools lecture contains citations but did not provide a bibliography, however I was able to find a reference to an article by Catherine Rankin and Yves Labreche in *Inuit Studies* (Volume 15, #1, 1991) which I think may address some of my curiosity concerning various ulu shapes. This article is titled: *Traditional ulus and their prehistoric counterparts in the Central and Eastern Arctic*. I have a backissue of this journal on the way. Here is the [abstract](#):

Post-scriptum :

Version 1.0 2/28/2006

Version 1.5 3/13/2005 images added

Version 1.6 3/31/2006 Additional Information added

Version 2.0 6/15/2006 Linder Eskimo Knife and Dannyboy sheath added

Version 2.1 10/09/2006 Fish River Sheath added

Version 2.2 11/20/2007 Small sewing ulu sheath added

Also note: Opening article logo, Innunguaq, and the two sewing ulu photos with the painted drum head were kindly supplied by Daniel Kuehn